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THE TREATMENT OF HISTORY¹

BEFORE entering on my subject let me congratulate the Association and Americans generally on the striking progress made by the study of history here in the course of the last half-century. To the names of Bancroft, Hildreth, Prescott, and Palgrave have been added those of Henry C. Lea, Henry Adams, James Ford Rhodes, John B. McMaster, John Fiske, James Schouler, Moses Coit Tyler, W. M. Sloane, Charles Francis Adams, and Woodrow Wilson. The progress shows itself alike in style, in research, and in fairness of judgment. In the style even of Bancroft there lingers something rather too rhetorical, too much savoring of the Fourth of July. Conscientious research has advanced with great strides. It has perhaps been carried almost to the point of exaggeration by researches into the history of obscure municipal institutions. But the excess is infinitely better than the defect.

In fairness and candor also there has been a vast improvement, specially to be noted in the treatment of questions with Great Britain. The Revolution, the War of 1812, and relations with England generally receive far more equitable treatment now than they did of yore. The other day a cry was raised in England that the American school-histories are poisoning the minds of Americans against us. Somebody proposed to deal with the subject specially and to stanch the source of rancor. I sent for a number of school-histories and examined them. In those of forty or fifty years ago the angry spirit was manifest; but it decreased as the present time was approached, and in the school-histories of the present day little I believe will be found of which an Englishman could fairly complain. From the taint of national arrogance English histories would hardly be found free. Too much space is given to war. Too much space perhaps is given to war in all histories. War is still unhappily of all themes the most exciting. It is the best-suited for lively description; it strikes the imagination of itself without calling for much skill on the part of the writer. Genius perhaps may some day make the annals of peaceful and beneficent achievement interesting even to boys. If I found any special fault with the American school-his-

¹ The President's address to the American Historical Association, December 28, 1904.

stories, it was not that they were rancorous, but that they were dry. For writing children's books special genius is required.

In proceeding to deal with the treatment of history, we are met at once by the question whether history is or can be made a science. Expectations of this kind are the natural offspring of the vast conquests which science has been making and which seem to proclaim its empire universal. We are confronted at once by the everlasting problem of free will. Human history may be the subject of philosophy ; the subject of science it can hardly be if the human will is free. I trust it is not presumptuous to say that this question of free will and necessity seems to me to be a mental puzzle and nothing more. In every action our consciousness, if we appeal to it, tells us that there are two elements : the antecedents or motive, and the volition. In every action which is doubtful or unusual or which calls for a special effort of will we are distinctly conscious of the volition as well as of the antecedents. In habitual and commonplace actions we are not conscious of the volition unless our attention is specially called to it. But always the two elements are there ; and upon the presence of the volition depend our retrospective judgments on our own actions and our judgments on the actions of our neighbors. The volition could not take place without the antecedents, nor will the antecedents produce action without the volition. It is difficult, probably impossible, to designate the exact relation between them ; hence the puzzle, hence the question about which such controversies have raged. Huxley, biased by physical science, took at one time the extreme necessarian view. But if I mistake not, he had latterly ceased to feel so sure that man was an automaton which had automatically fancied itself a free agent but had automatically come back to the belief that after all it was an automaton. His superb good-sense prevailed.

There is apparently another serious difficulty in attempting to treat human history as a science. To base a valid induction we must have the phenomena completely before us. But human history is not yet complete, nor do we know how far it may be from completion or what phenomena its progress may be destined to disclose. Comte traces, as he thinks, the history of man through three stages : the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive, with their subdivisions, and assumes that the positive stage is final. He accordingly proceeds to give the world a form of government, a form of religion, a calendar of social worthies, permanent institutions of different kinds. But his finality is without reasonable warrant. The era which he styles positive may not be the last. Destiny may have totally new developments in store. At all events it is not likely

that a government, a religion, or a calendar of worthies framed by a man of this generation will serve for generations yet to come.

Besides, human history is full of accidents baffling to theory as well as to calculation. By the merest accident Napoleon becomes a French citizen. It seems that he had at one time thought of enlisting in the British navy. Had he been shot on the bridge of Lodi or assassinated by Georges Cadoudal, both of which events were perfectly possible, the whole current of history would have been changed. Gustavus Adolphus is in the full career of victory, which to a moral certainty would have ended in the redemption of Germany. A wreath of mist comes over the field of Lützen and separates him from his troops. He falls, and half Germany remains Catholic. Napoleon, it is true, would not have been what he was or have done what he did without predisposing forces. But the predisposing forces would not have produced the events without Napoleon, whose appearance on the scene, as it could not possibly have been foretold, was, if anything is, a chance. Such instances might be multiplied without number, and they are apparently fatal to the conception and verification of any scientific law.

For the philosophy of history which traces the interdependence of events, the connection of causes and effects, the operation of special influences general or personal, permanent or temporary, the distinction of epochs, the formation of national character, and above all the general progress of humanity, it is needless to say there is a vast, fruitful, and highly cultivated field.

Here perhaps may be noticed the view which seems to be held by my very eminent predecessor in the presidency of the Association, Mr. Henry C. Lea, as to the division of history into moral epochs. Mr. Lea appears to think that it is irrational and unjust to condemn Philip II and the inquisitors of the day for putting people to death on account of their religious belief, such having been the moral law of that epoch. This view would seem to lead to the division of history into a series of moral zones with which our judgments of action and character ought to vary. But such a conception would surely be fatal to morality itself, as it would destroy the identity of the moral law. In judging individual character and action just allowance must of course be made for the general beliefs and prevailing influences of the time. But this is the limit of condonation. The age of Philip II and the Spanish Inquisition was an age of murderous persecution. What made it so? The conduct of Philip II and the inquisitors, which itself was influenced not solely by hatred of disbelief but by criminal propensities of a grosser kind: the despot's lust of unlimited power, the hierarch's lust of ascend-

ancy and wealth. Philip II was not only a persecutor, he was a murderer and an adulterer. He hired assassins to take the life of his noble enemy William the Silent. It is by no means certain that the propensity to religious murder was universal or even general among the people of that day. Nor was morality on this subject without a witness. Erasmus, invoking the judgment of Europe on the execution of Sir Thomas More, pleaded that no one during More's chancellorship had suffered death for heresy. More in his *Utopia* advocates the broadest principle of religious toleration. Can it be supposed that William the Silent or Henry IV would have burned people alive for misbelief? Was not the reaction in England against Queen Mary and her religion largely caused by the fires of Smithfield?

Comte's series of historic epochs, distinguished by the progress of ideas from the theological and the metaphysical to the positive, cannot, it seems to me, be really identified; though, like many theories incapable of perfect verification, it has shed important light on the subject. The identification of the metaphysical era is especially difficult. But I must not attempt the discussion of this complicated question here. I confine myself to the recognition of Comte's merits as an earnest thinker and a devoted servant of humanity. Vico's theory of historic cycles now hardly calls for examination; though Vico may claim the honor of having been the first to treat history philosophically, unless we include in philosophies of history a religious survey such as that of Bossuet or an observation of political sequences such as that in the *Politics* of Aristotle.

The crown of science is prediction. Were history a science, it would enable us to predict events. It is needless to say that the forecast of even the most sagacious of public men is often totally at fault with regard to the immediate future. On the brink of the great Revolutionary wars Pitt looked forward with confidence to a long continuance of peace. Palmerston, if he was rightly reported, deemed the cause of German unification hopeless at the moment when Bismarck was coming on the scene and unification was at hand.

The philosophy of history, on the other hand, without affecting the character or claiming the prerogatives of a science, but simply resting on the identity of human nature, traces past effects to their causes and from the continuance or recurrence of the cause predicts a recurrence of the effect. It discloses the interaction and the nature of all the forces and influences of which past history has been the outcome, ranging them in their order and trying to assign to each its part in the product. It frequently takes the form of separate treatises. But no historical work which shows the sequence of

events, nothing in short that is really history and not merely a chronicle, can be without philosophy.

Writers on the philosophy of history are in danger of overstating the effect of some particular cause the importance of which they are or seem to themselves to be the first to recognize. Buckle, for instance, in a work which produced a great effect in its day, seems sometimes to overrate the influence of natural phenomena of a striking kind in the formation of national character. He traces, for example, the religious character of the Spaniards to the impression made on them by the terrors of volcanoes and earthquakes. But there appear to be no records to show that in the formative period of Spanish character volcanic phenomena greatly prevailed. The religious character of the Spaniard was formed largely by the long conflict with the Moors, as was that of the Russians by the long conflict with the heathen Tartars. Volcanic phenomena do not seem to have affected the character of the Japanese. Italian character in its Roman phase was, and in its Catholic phase is, the manifest outcome of historical causes quite independent of Vesuvius. Among the sources of Scotch character Buckle reckons the influence of thunder-storms and of the reverberations of the thunder among the mountains. But the mountains are in the Celtic Highlands, and the Scottish character is that of the Lowland Teuton; not to say that, if I may trust the experience of a shooting-season, thunder-storms are far from frequent among the Scotch mountains. The backwardness of native American civilization is ascribed to absence of animals of draft or burden. That may have been a partial cause. But the ruined cities of Central America show that much might have been done by human labor; so apparently do the great monuments of Egypt.

I have read an ingenious work on the philosophy of history which ascribes everything to the struggle for subsistence and the conflict between economical classes to which it gives birth. The theory is taken as the key even to religious revolutions, such as that of England in the time of Charles I. The landowners, it is remarked, were mainly on the one side, the yeomanry on the other. Only to a limited extent was this the fact. But it can hardly be questioned that religious convictions and the political tendencies allied with them were the fundamental motives. Subsistence is of course the basis of all, and the division into economical classes is of the highest importance. But the sharpness of the division and its influence on the course of civilization are capable of overstatement. Not all consumers are producers, though the vast majority of them are, but all producers must be consumers; so society can hardly be divided on

that line. The vast and infinitely complex frame with its boundless variety of influences and circumstances, while it affords abundant matter for fruitful remark, defies sweeping generalization. None of the sweeping generalizations, at least so far, has held its ground.

Again, we have a philosopher of mark who holds the apparently paradoxical doctrine that man has advanced by disregarding the dictates of his individual reason. That progress has been largely due to the action of man against his propensities and his apparent interest is true enough. All self-sacrifice, patriotic devotion, and religious martyrdom may be so described. But reason comprehends the whole of the mental antecedents to action, whether selfish or unselfish or of whatever kind they may be; and we can no more act against the whole of the mental antecedents to action than a man can jump out of his skin.

Of Carlyle, what is to be said? Is his view of history to be called philosophy or poetry? A serious philosophy of history it certainly cannot be called. "As I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones: the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these."¹ This evidently is not philosophy. Great men were not creators, but the consummate products of their generation, giving its tendencies the fullest expression, and reacting upon it by the force of their genius. But they were its offspring, not its creators. What would Odin, if there was such a man, have been without Norse tendencies and beliefs? What would Mahomet have been without Arabian tribalism, Judaism, and Christianity? What would Luther have been without the ferment of spiritual insurrection against Rome which had long before produced Wycliffe? What would Shakespeare have been without the Elizabethan era, Voltaire without his century, Napoleon without the Revolution and the outbreak of military adventure which ensued? Carlyle's preaching has been well described as an alterative. His sentiment was a revolt, and probably a seasonable revolt, against triumphant and self-complacent democracy in all its phases, historical as well as actual, intellectual as well as political and social. Democracy's thirty millions of voters to Carlyle seem

¹ *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Lecture 1.

mostly fools, owing everything that is good or sensible about them to the great men, who he says are "sent" into the world, not born of it, to be its guiding lights. There is no doubt that democratic optimism and the worship of the ballot-box after the triumph of Parliamentary reform in England had about them something repulsive, particularly to Carlyle. Both his antipathy and his worship were carried to the pitch almost of frenzy. Cromwell, generally humane in war, deplores the slaughter at Drogheda as a sad necessity. Carlyle exults in it and asks us whether we dare wed the heaven's lightning. But it is in his *Frederick the Great* that his fancy breaks all bounds. Frederick's ability, military or political, nobody questions. As a king he was progressive, made good reforms, such as the abolition of torture, and above all proclaimed liberty of conscience. On the other hand, he went to war, as himself avowed, to win himself a name, and, having no title to Silesia other than his worshiper's mystic "destiny", plunged Europe into a war of twenty years. Carlyle puts morality under his idol's feet. When sophistry breaks down, he flies off into rhapsody. There is a memorable passage in *Sartor Resartus* denouncing and deriding the barbarism of war. But in the *Frederick the Great* humanity disappears and gives place to a sentiment bordering on the brutal.

At the same time let me emphatically acknowledge Carlyle's greatness as a teacher of history. In picturesqueness he has hardly a peer. Still more strikingly unique and a greater mark of genius are the breadth and boldness with which he presents the whole of humanity with all its weaknesses and absurdities, with its comic and laughable as well as its tragic and pathetic side. This is an invaluable feature of his *History of the French Revolution*, a work which, though perhaps not strictly accurate in all its details, is in depth of insight, in breadth of treatment, as well as in picturesqueness and vividness still without a rival. I would venture to commend it as a valuable training in its way for the historic sense.

To lay down any rules for the writing of history seems impossible. The style must vary with the subject, with the genius of the writer, with the intelligence of the reader. To be generally read any work must obviously be interesting to ordinary minds. There is perhaps rather a tendency in this scientific and sociological age to underrate the value of narrative skill. Stubbs's *Constitutional History of England*, which is treated as the paragon, is indeed admirable and invaluable as a work of research. But for anybody but an earnest student it is hardly readable. Hume has been severely lashed by Freeman and others of that austere school for his inaccuracies; no doubt with justice. But it is to be borne in mind

that by the attractiveness of his style and his art as a narrator he made history popular and has imparted to countless readers a knowledge of it, true as to the main facts, though in some particulars incorrect. The same may be said of Robertson, whose *Charles the Fifth* is a broad and luminous treatment of a great subject, superseded no doubt in many respects by writers who have had access to further information, yet a good service rendered to the study of history in its day. Moreover, to instruct, touch, and elevate humanity a history must be human. It must be a lively presentation of character and action. Sociology is a thing by itself. So is every historical treatise written on the sociological principle. So are those special treatises on an infinite variety of subjects in which character and action have no place. If history ever does become science, a historical work will take the form of a scientific treatise. Reasons have been offered for doubting whether that day will ever come.

Macaulay, himself the most brilliant of historians, in his essay on "History" says that to be a really great historian is perhaps the rarest of intellectual distinctions. "The cause", he says, "may easily be assigned. This province of literature is a debateable land. It lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers; and, like other districts similarly situated, it is ill-defined, ill cultivated, and ill regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory. History, it has been said, is philosophy teaching by examples. Unhappily what the philosophy gains in soundness and depth, the examples generally lose in vividness. A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Those who can justly estimate these almost insuperable difficulties will not think it strange that every writer should have failed, either in the narrative or in the speculative department of history."¹

Here, I think, we have a specimen of that love of antithesis which is rather a weakness of Macaulay. Setting aside Macaulay himself, it surely would be hard to say of Gibbon that he had failed in combining the philosophic with the narrative element. Exception may

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, May, 1828, 331.

reasonably be taken to his philosophy as an inadequate and unfair treatment of Christianity, the really great motive-power of the period. But the art with which the philosophy is combined with the narrative seems to be complete. The same apparently may be said of Tacitus, whose style is unapproachable, partly perhaps because the language in which he wrote was imperial. The loss of the greater part of Tacitus's works is the greatest calamity of literature. Thucydides employs as the vehicles of his philosophy fictitious speeches, for which Macaulay severely censures him. But Thucydides can hardly be said to pretend that the speeches are real; and his employment of them may be regarded with interest as the first attempt at a philosophy of history.

We must expect writers of history to be of their age and country. In the sentiment and style of Mommsen's *History of Rome* we perceive Germany passing from the metaphysical to the militant and hear the tramp of the German armies marching on Paris. Voltaire, Hume, Renan, Gibbon, Michelet, and on the other hand Montalembert, are redolent of the influences of their time.

I must not omit to mention so important an event in the study of history as the appearance of the *Cambridge Modern History*, planned by the late Lord Acton and commenced under the auspices of that prince of students. The work seems to be truly described in the introduction as a "series of monographs, conceived on a connected system," which, "instead of presenting a collection of fragments, possesses a definite unity of its own. . . . Each separate writer treats of a subject with which he is familiar, and is freed from any other responsibility than that of setting forth clearly the salient features of . . . [his] period. . . . He may follow any line of investigation of his own, and may supply links of connexion at his will. He may receive suggestions from different minds, and may pursue them. . . . He is free at the same time from the aridity of a chronological table. . . . Each subject or period has a natural coherence of its own."¹ Complete harmony among the minds of different contributors cannot be expected. Nor can we look for the interest of a flowing and lively narrative. What the work rather claims to be is an aid to exact and comprehensive study, and this function it may be expected to perform. There is a copious bibliography for each part. I cannot pass by the work due to the inspiration of my illustrious friend without deplored, as a student of history, the immense treasure of historic knowledge which has been buried in that grave.

Let us treat the subject as we may, scientifically, philosophically, or in any other method, what can we make of the history of man?

¹ *The Cambridge Modern History*, I, 5.

Is the race the creation of a directing Providence, or a production of blind Nature on this planet, fortuitous in its course and in its end? We have, preceding the birth of man, eons, it may be almost said, of abortion; eons of animal races which destroyed each other or perished on the primeval globe; a glacial era; man at length brought into existence, but remaining, perhaps for countless generations, a savage, and afterward a barbarian; wild tribal conflicts and cataclysms of barbarian conquest. Then comes the dawn of civilization, which even now has spread over only a portion of the race, and even for that portion has been retarded and marred by wars, revolutions, persecutions, crimes and aberrations of every kind, besides plagues, earthquakes, and other calamities of nature. Through all this mankind, or at least the leading members of the race, have been struggling onward to social, moral, perhaps spiritual life. Are things tending to a result answerable to the long preparation, the immense effort, and the boundless suffering which the preparation and the effort have involved? Or will the end of all be the physical catastrophe which science tells us must close the existence of the material scene? That question not even a *Cambridge Modern History* attempts to answer.

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